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Three Towneley plays

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Three Towneley plays

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THREE TOWNELEY PLAYS	Dennis Hamley

THREE T TOWNELEY PLAYS

Adapted into Modern English by

DENNIS HAMLEY



HEINEMANN

LONDON MELBOURNE TORONTO

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Heinemann Educational Books Ltd
(Drama Department)
The Windmill Press
Kingswood, Surrey

First published 1962

Published by
Heinemann Educational Books Ltd
15-16 Queen Street, Mayfair, London W.1.
Printed in Great Britain by
The Windmill Press Ltd, Kingswood, Surrey

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	vii
THE PLAY OF THE KILLING OF ABEL	i
THE PLAY OF NOAH AND HIS SONS	23
THE FIRST SHEPHERDS' PLAY	53

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INTRODUCTION

The three plays in this book were first performed in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Of course, the originals sounded very different from these versions because they were written and acted in Middle English, a language which took centuries to develop into the English we speak today. But we can still know something of the pleasure these men of the Middle Ages felt in acting them as a respite from the hard and difficult lives they led.

These plays were written for people who could neither read nor write, and many years were to go by before the first permanent theatre in Britain was built. However, this does not mean that the plays are not worth our consideration, or that those acting them were idiots. Acting was as natural to them as it is to us; nearly all children's games depend on acting a part – the sheriff, or the gunman, or the doctor.

What children do without thinking twice about – even if there is no script and they have to invent the words as they go along – these men did too.

THE HISTORY OF THE PLAYS

Nearly two thousand years before even these plays were written the Ancient Greeks were acting some of the finest plays known to man. Later on, when Rome was powerful, there were some successful Roman playwrights – though they were never as good as the Greeks – and playgoing was very popular with the Romans until they became keener on watching Christians being thrown to the lions.

But we know very little of what happened in Europe after

INTRODUCTION

the Roman Empire was destroyed. Minstrels, jugglers and mimes, who travelled from place to place performing as they went, were very popular. The minstrels sang ballads which told stories of heroes such as Robin Hood, or of legendary and often supernatural events. Though it is quite easy to turn these ballads into plays we don't know that this idea ever occurred to the minstrels.

We do know, however, that the first hints of a recognisable play date from the tenth century. Church services at that time were in Latin and very long and complicated. At one point in the Easter Service, something strange happened.

One priest in a white robe sat near the altar on which the cross was covered by a cloth. Three other priests walked towards him while he said (in Latin, of course): 'Who are you looking for in the sepulchre, Christian Women?'

The three other priests chanted together: 'We are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, O man from Heaven.'

The first priest, lifting up the cloth from the cross, said: 'He is not here. He has risen from the dead, as he said he would. Go and tell everybody.'

So there it was – quite by accident, it seems, a microscopic play had been performed.

The clergymen of the time must have been at once struck by its possibilities because in time more and more short plays were written to illustrate happenings in the Bible. However, they all had one great fault as far as most people were concerned – they were written in Latin. English was still only the language of the common people. Scholars and priests wrote in Latin; the Nobles preferred to speak in French, for this was the time of the Norman Conquest. So there was not much point in performing these plays for ordinary people because they couldn't understand them. As the Bible had not yet been translated into English, they

INTRODUCTION

had little chance of understanding the religion they all believed in.

Two hundred years after the first play in Church we find plays being performed all over Britain. At some time during these years people felt they wanted plays of their own in their own language – so they set about providing them. By the fourteenth century many plays – now not connected with the Church but still recounting Bible stories – were being performed in their own dialects by people who were certainly not priests.

There are still some copies of these plays in libraries all over the world. Most important are the nearly complete sets of those performed at Chester, York and Wakefield, as well as another set which was probably performed at Coventry.

Each town, then, had a complete set of these 'Miracle Plays'. Each set was called a 'cycle' because together the plays told the whole Bible story from the Creation to the day of Judgment, and because they were performed in order on the same day – or in as few days as possible, because some cycles had over forty plays in them. So once a year, at a great religious festival such as Whitsun, the whole town took time off to celebrate, and an important part of the celebration was a performance of the Miracle Cycle. Those of you who live in the North of England and watch or take part in the Whitwalks are still celebrating Whitsun in a way rather like that of these people living six hundred years ago. The plays were always wildly popular, for apart from the pleasure of acting and watching them, it was almost the only chance the people had of hearing the stories in the Bible at first hand.

It is a hard task to organise the performance of one play – so you can see it was a mammoth task to organise the per-

INTRODUCTION

formance of forty. But in the Middle Ages there was a ready-made solution to this problem in every town. Every trade or craft – the butchers, the cobblers, the smiths or the cloth-workers – formed a society, or Guild, to look after its own interests. The Guilds were not altogether unlike the Trade Unions we have today. The organisers of the cycles merely gave one play to each Guild to act every year – usually one in which it could do some advertising. For instance the *Play of Noah and the Flood* at Chester was given to the Guild of the Water Leaders and the Drawers of Dee. At York, the Guild of Nailmakers acted the *Play of the Crucifixion*. The fact that they used the acting of the Crucifixion to show off their nails did not mean they were any the less serious about the play.

You can see the same idea followed today when a town puts on a carnival procession – every organisation has its own float, which is very often a decorated lorry. The Guilds in fact performed their plays on large carts which were not unlike decorated lorries. The carts were called ‘pagonds’ (a word which has developed into our modern word ‘pageant’). The pageants were towed from place to place in the town and at each place the pageant was stopped and the play was performed. Then another pageant followed, so the whole cycle would be performed in several different districts in the town.

The pageants were fully mobile theatres. They had dressing rooms underneath the stage, which had three levels. The main stage in the middle represented earth; underneath was a floor to show Hell, with trapdoors leading up to the main stage. Above was a level which represented Heaven. Here God and the Angels spoke their lines when they were required to. The Gates of Heaven and Hell’s Mouth were also represented: there is a story of how one producer,

INTRODUCTION

finding a dead whale washed up on the shore, used its huge skull with the mouth propped open to represent the mouth of Hell.

The producers had no special ideas about scenery. They merely brought on anything that appealed to them. We don't know, for instance, how Noah built his Ark. He probably brought on some odd pieces of wood, which he would fix together and the result would look only vaguely like a boat. But once Noah had told them what it was, the audience would accept the fact that this heap of wood was meant to be the great Ark.

The play-cycles were performed yearly throughout England until the sixteenth century. After this, however, they died out. People began to prefer new pastimes; new kinds of play were being written; many people objected to Bible stories being turned into plays at all. Meanwhile, England was becoming a Protestant country. Queen Elizabeth I was on the throne and Shakespeare was writing plays for the Globe Theatre in London. The world was changing and there seemed no place for the old Miracle plays. By the end of the sixteenth century they had virtually disappeared and the first chapter in the history of drama in England was over.

THE TOWNELEY PLAYS

The originals of these three plays are from the Towneley Cycle which was performed at Wakefield in Yorkshire. The cycle has this name because for many years the only remaining manuscript was owned by the Towneley family who lived in the Lancashire town of Burnley. The manuscript seems to be a copy quickly made up from the Guilds' separate copies of their own plays – for that reason a lot of

INTRODUCTION

information we would like to have is missing. For instance, we don't know for certain which Guilds performed these three plays although we do know others in the same cycle, and there is a strong probability that *The Killing of Abel* was performed by the Glovers. The manuscript, by the way, is now in the Huntington Library, San Marino, California – a fate which the original copyist probably did not foresee.

The plays in the Towneley Cycle are probably the best of all the Miracle plays. A number of them were written by an unknown man so gifted that he is called 'The Wakefield Master'. *The Killing of Abel*, *Noah and his Sons* and *The First Shepherds' Play* (he wrote two plays about the shepherds) are all by him and fairly typical of his work.

The Wakefield Master realised something that the clergymen writing their Latin plays in the tenth century did not. He saw that his plays would get nowhere if they merely tried to teach: they would have to entertain as well. Some of the other Miracle plays – especially in the Coventry Cycle – are boring simply because there was no effort to make them anything but flat reproductions of what happened in the Bible.

The first play we are fairly sure the Wakefield Master wrote was *The Killing of Abel*, and in it appears Cain's servant, who was given the name of Pikeharnes (or Pickharness – a man who stole the armour of dead soldiers). Yet nothing in the Bible tells us Cain had a servant. However, without Pickharness, the play would be much less effective. You can see that with such a name he is obviously a rogue – yet he is an impudent, amusing rogue. His opening remarks introduce the play and get the audience into a good humour: when Cain has killed Abel and is struck with horror and remorse for what he has done, Pickharness makes it all the worse for him, with his jokes mocking what Cain

INTRODUCTION

is saying. Cain tries to say that the King (and also the audience) will forgive him. The more Cain tries to excuse himself, the more Pickharness laughs at him, and the more we see how pathetic are Cain's attempts to wriggle away from his guilt.

The effect of all this was to show Cain up for what he is – the people in the audience would not just say to themselves 'Ah, that's Abel killed off – what's the next play?' They would say 'What a monster Cain is. Yet you can't help feeling sorry for him at the end.'

When the Wakefield Master came to write his other plays he took this idea of embroidering the Bible stories still further. Pickharness was very popular with audiences: he was the sort of villain everybody would recognise at once. So in his later plays the Wakefield Master made all his characters into people his audience would feel they knew; in this way the stories in the plays would be clearer and mean much more to them. He knew nobody living had experienced such a world-shattering event as Noah did when he faced the Flood. He also knew that when a man is in the middle of a rough, hard life, it is difficult for him to understand why so much attention is paid to the birth of Christ. He knew that he had to prevent the plays from being accounts of impossible happenings of years ago in far-off lands.

We can see how he did it. Suppose a friend comes up to you and tells you of some terrible misfortune he has suffered. You will probably say 'Hard luck, Fred', and either think no more about it or wish you could do something to help. If, however, you have suffered the same misfortune, you can be of much more help to him because you know exactly how he feels. In the same way, news of great disasters – earthquakes, air crashes, or wars in which thousands of

INTRODUCTION

people die and thousands more are made homeless refugees – often leave us unmoved. Although we often feel guilty about it, we can't feel all the sympathy we would like because we have never experienced anything like it ourselves. If, however, someone we know has survived a crash or fought in a war, and he describes to us what happened, we can understand it far better, because we are being told by someone we know and who we think is like us. So, when we hear how he acted we feel we know how we would have acted ourselves. He has given a link between us and the experience which makes it real to us.

In the *Play of Noah and his Sons*, one of the main characters is Noah's wife. But she is hardly mentioned in the Bible. The Wakefield Master starts to add his own ideas to the Bible, just as he added Pickharness to the story of Cain and Abel. He thought that if he made Noah and his wife the sort of couple who are always having rows he would kill two birds with one stone. First he would make the audience laugh because they would see themselves or their friends in Noah and his wife. (We laugh at most of our comedians today because they do things we do ourselves or feel we might do if we were not careful). And when the audience believed in Noah and his wife, they would believe in the Flood and understand it much better – because they had seen it happen to people they knew. They would see that in face of a common danger every argument is forgotten – especially when your whole world is threatened with destruction.

The First Shepherds' Play follows the same idea. The Wakefield Master had a big problem here: a man who is poor, with little hope of a better or more comfortable life is not going to be very interested if he is merely shown the birth of Christ and then told how it has made all the difference to him. It is like telling a Yugoslavian peasant that English

INTRODUCTION

spelling is to be simplified: he would not see how it could affect him – though it probably would in some way. So the Wakefield Master took the shepherds away from Palestine and put them on the Moors above his own town. Now they were the sort of people the audience would see every day: sooner or later somebody watching would say ‘Hey! That’s just like old Joe’. At the beginning of the play the shepherds are in a poor state. Gyb has lost all his sheep because of the foot-rot: John Horne tells how the poor are persecuted by rich men and robbers. The world has gone to pieces and ‘poor men are in the ditch’. Again, the audience would see themselves in this. However the shepherds look forward to better times and manage to laugh together and share their food and beer without falling out with each other completely. Then they are deeply frightened by the Angel. When they collect their wits and talk over what the Angel has said, they realise that this birth is what they have been waiting for to give them new hope. So they start the play depressed and they finish it happy – and the reason is the birth of Christ. And the audience would say to themselves, ‘If that’s what they felt about it, then so would we because they are so much like us.’ Thus, the birth of Christ in the play is not a matter of cradle being wheeled on the stage and an announcement that in it was the Saviour. It becomes an event which would mean a lot to everyone watching.

The Wakefield Master, then, was one of the first dramatists in Britain to realise how important it is to let an audience feel they are linked to the events they see on the stage so they can understand them better. Nearly all dramatists since then have done the same thing, though not always in the same way. Journalists, teachers, television commentators – all people whose job is to give information – also try to let us

INTRODUCTION

understand as well as see, using methods not unlike those of this playwright of the Middle Ages.

THE LANGUAGE

Here is the first verse of the Shepherds' Play in the original:

GYB: Lord, what thay ar weyll that hens ar past!
For thay noght feyll theym to downe cast.
Here is mekyll unceyll, and long has it last:
Now in hart, now in heyll, now in weytt, now in
blast;
Now in care,
Now in comforth agane;
Now in fayre, now in rane;
Now in hart full fane,
And after full sare.

Even this has been simplified from the original: there were several letters used then that have dropped out of use and modern letters have done service here. It is possible with an effort to understand what it means: the language obviously has a great connection with modern English. If it were spoken now, it would sound like a man speaking with such a broad Yorkshire accent that nobody living even in Yorkshire could understand him.

At that time, when transport hardly existed and a person living in London would think of Wakefield almost as we think of the moon, a dialect was not just an accent found in one part of the country. It was a different language. English could not be called one language until the sixteenth century: and then only because Courtiers and Noblemen began to speak and write it instead of French. Thus a single language – a sort of 'Standard English', almost like B.B.C. English today – was developed.

INTRODUCTION

You may wonder why the plays are written in verse. The answer is merely that it was the obvious thing to do. To explain this, here is a verse from the Authorised Version of the Bible, translated long after the Miracle Plays and long after English had become a completely national language.

Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his Kingdom, to order it and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever.

This sounds – and is – magnificent, and we can see what it means. But try to read it out loud. It is difficult at first. What does ‘to order it’ mean? What, for that matter, is ‘it’?

You can work it out easily enough – but you have to think for a moment because it is neither clear nor simple. It is a very involved sentence and if you wrote one like it in a composition, you would probably find a heavy correction on the page.

Why, then, were all these learned clergymen unable to write English simply? It was because at that stage English was still a new and unfamiliar language, difficult to pin down. When we study grammar today, we call a word a noun, a verb or an adjective because we are describing what it obviously does in the sentence in which it occurs. However, men who tried to put English into a grammar-book when it was still such a disorderly language found it an impossible task unless they tried to make it the same as the grammar of a language they understood thoroughly, such as Latin. They produced some strange results. Only after some hundreds of years of getting to grips with the language was it easy to order into clear prose. A language, like a new car, has to be run in.

However, language has rhythm and rhyme as well. These

INTRODUCTION

are easier to understand because they are instinctive to us. And if you are a writer who has a lot to pack into a few lines you are much more likely to do it if you have to keep the lines to a certain rhythm and a certain length – and make them rhyme as well. Geoffrey Chaucer, who lived in the fourteenth century, was a great poet; his poetry is very clear, but his prose is hopeless.

Thus, in the history of language, the writing of verse always comes before the writing of prose. We can see the same process at work when we watch small children growing up. Children like hearing nursery rhymes before they like hearing long stories. Very often they can write little poems long before they learn to write proper sentences. It is all a matter of familiarity with your own language.

Therefore, it would never have occurred to the Wakefield Master to write in anything but verse. And in any case much of the life and vigour of the plays comes from their rhythm and rhyme. Verse is also easier to learn and what we remember stays with us much longer. For instance, comedians' catch-phrases are short and snappy; they have rhythm and sometimes they rhyme. We remember them easily – and a comedian's script-writer probably finds it much easier to think of good catch-phrases than he does to write a full-length script.

The often illiterate actors of the Middle Ages, then, probably found it quite simple to learn their parts in these plays – and the audience found it simple to understand them. If they had been in prose neither actors nor audience would have made anything of them.

So, there you are. I hope you enjoy reading and acting these plays. I think you will agree that, though our language may have changed a great deal over the years, people seem to have changed very little.

THE PLAY OF
THE KILLING OF ABEL

CHARACTERS

GOD

CAIN

ABEL

PICKHARNESS, Cain's Servant

SCENE – A PARTLY-PLOUGHED FIELD

Enter PICKHARNES, Cain's servant

PICKHARNES (*to audience*): Hello, hello there! – you'll be glad

That I've come here – I'm quite a lad.

Now, shut your noise, you rotten crew,

Or I'll have the devil after you.

Don't you know who's due on now?

He leans forward and speaks more confidentially, though now threateningly.

Anyone who makes a row –

You see this horn here from a cow?

I'll make him blow it now

Till his teeth bleed.

Friends – watch it, will you? I forbid

So much from you as a little cry.

The man who dares do such a deed –

(*He shouts*) The devil hang him up to dry!

(*Now conceitedly*) Now, I'm a person of some fame.

My master is the noble Cain –

You've heard his praises sung.

If anyone dares anger him

He'll get at least a broken limb.

Anything honest my master hates:

I reckon there's some folk round here are his mates.

But keep your lips wrapped round your tongue,

Criminals everyone.

THREE TOWNELEY PLAYS

CAIN enters from behind. PICKHARNES, pretending not to see him, sidles off the stage, breaking into a run with his last words.

If my master comes, give him welcome.
Goodbye, for I am gone. (*Exits*)

CAIN comes to the front of the stage with his plough, driven by eight imaginary horses.

CAIN: Gid up, Greyhorne! Come on, Grime.
Get moving! We're wasting too much time.
You'd think your feet were stuck in the slime.

The horses have stopped. CAIN makes as if to speak to one of them, sarcastically.

So, we've finished, have we, mare?
Feel that!

He hits the horse – then moves to another horse and speaks to it.

Now, Down, let's see how you can pull.

'Down' obviously doesn't move. CAIN is furiously angry.

You're slower than a paralysed mule.
You horses must think I'm a fool.

He moves to another horse, and speaks to it in a wheedling voice.

Now, Donny, you and I'll go far.

THE PLAY OF THE KILLING OF ABEL

'Donny' won't budge. CAIN says the next line to the audience – then he turns back to the horse.

Look there! This horse heard what I said!
All right! (*Hits it*) You are the laziest mare
To pull this plough I ever had.

PICKHARNES creeps round the back of the stage, obviously trying not to be seen.

Here, Pickharness, here! If you value your life.
PICKHARNES: May God make sure you never thrive.
CAIN: One man alone this lot can't drive.
Didn't you hear me cry?

PICKHARNES doesn't answer at once but sees what he can do to get the horses moving.

PICKHARNES: Now Mall and Stott, won't you two go?
Lemming, Morell, Whitehorn – ho!

They won't move, and PICKHARNES gives up.

No good. A fool could tell you why.

CAIN: You young swine. They don't get enough to eat.
PICKHARNES (*sarcastically*): I can't be bothered, Sir, to
feed them meat.
I put the food into their eating racks –
Then tie the horses up and turn their backs!

CAIN is furiously angry again, and hits Pickharness.

CAIN: I could kill you with my axe.

THREE TOWNELEY PLAYS

PICKHARNESS *hits Cain.*

PICKHARNESS: You'll get that blow straight back all right.

CAIN (*surprised*): I am your master. Will you fight?

PICKHARNESS: Yes, I pay my debts back at the same rate.

When someone hits me, I don't wait.

CAIN: All right, forget it. Get on your way.

We've got to plough this hill.

PICKHARNESS (*shouts*): You useless animals – move on, I say;

(*Aside to audience*) But let the plough stand still. (*Exits*)

ABEL *enters. He is carrying a large sheaf of corn.*

ABEL: May God, as we all know he can,
Save you, brother, and your man.

CAIN (*contemptuously*): Get out, you fool. You make me sick.

Do you want a pair of boots to lick?

You shouldn't have come till you were told.

Still, now you're here – either drive or hold

These horses here for me.

Though you're little use to anyone

As far as I can see.

ABEL: Brother, why do you hate all men,
Myself especially?

But listen, brother, to what I say.

Our people's law we must obey.

Everybody who is wise

Worships God with sacrifice.

THE PLAY OF THE KILLING OF ABEL

From our fathers we have learnt
Our sacrifices should be burnt.
Come on, brother – let us go
To worship God – we are so slow.
We must give God part of our lot:
Corn or cattle – no matter what.

So therefore, brother, we'll pray first
That we are freed from Satan's curse,
And then we'll give our offering.
Then in Heaven we'll be first
Without enduring suffering
When judgment comes to each.

CAIN (*laughs*): What? (*To audience*) Let out your geese; the
fox will preach!
(*To Abel*) Do you still think that you can teach
Me with your sermonising?
Just shut your mouth right up, I say –
You and your lies. Throughout the day
You stand there – getting in the way
And forever criticising.

Shall I leave my plough and everything
And go with you to make an offering?
No! I'm not such a raving fool.
You go to the Devil, and tell him I sent you.
What's God given you to like him so?
He's given me nothing but sorrow and woe.

ABEL: Cain, leave this vain carping,
For God gives you all your living.

CAIN: What? I've never borrowed a farthing

THREE TOWNELEY PLAYS

From him, the tight-fisted beast.

ABEL: Brother, our elders made it clear

Our goods should go to God so dear.

Now to sacrifice let us walk in fear.

CAIN: My money got pinched by that thieving priest

The last time I offered.

ABEL (*sadly*): Cain, dear brother – walk with me, at least.

I wish our gifts were now proffered.

CAIN (*sullen*): Why should I give all this away?

I'm getting poorer every day.

This is the truth. Hear what I say –

My harvests are all mean.

Look at me. I've gone lean.

Losing money all the time I've been.

And I won't get a bit of ease

From that great God you love to please.

ABEL (*in an urgent voice*): Yes! All the food you gain with
thrift

Is God's. It is his greatest gift.

CAIN (*again sullen and bitter*): I may as well scavenge by the
sea.

Your God has got no time for me.

Now if he threw food down from the skies

I might look at him otherwise.

While other men's corn grew ripe and tall,

I hardly got a grain at all.

At sowing-time I wanted seed:

Of good corn then I had great need.

But I never got an ounce of his –

So he won't get a look at this.

No – I can't see why I'm to blame –

Why shouldn't I serve him back the same?

THE PLAY OF THE KILLING OF ABEL

ABEL (*saddened, and also trying to get away*): Dear brother
Cain, do not speak so.
Now let us both to worship go.
Good Cain, let us be on our way.
I wish we would no longer stay.

CAIN: Can't you shut up? My time I won't waste
Like you. (*Mocks him*) The devil will get you if you don't
make haste.
(*Angry again*) As long as I live,
My corn I won't give
Neither to God nor to anyone.
The way I live is to keep what I've won.
If all my possessions I'd given or sold
I'd not have a coat left to keep out the cold.
If you're so foolish to squander your stuff
You'll be out on the road and sleeping rough.

ABEL: Dear brother, come on, in God's dear name.
I am afraid we shall get blame.
Let us be quick – not hang around here.
CAIN: Just look at you, man. You're shaking with fear.
My dear, young brother, I think you're mad.
Don't you see how very sad
It is to give away all you've got?
No man can part me from my lot.
Why roughen your hands and split your shoes
If you can't work for whom you choose?

ABEL: People would see and wonder whether
We'd parted, if we don't go together.
Our beloved father would wonder why.
Are we not brothers, you and I?

THREE TOWNELEY PLAYS

CAIN: I sometimes wonder. But I'll let you snivel
Away, you baby. Keep on with your drivel.
No matter if I make God angry or glad,
To give him these sheaves of corn makes me mad.
I admit I'd go gladly up the hill
With you if I thought I'd win on the deal.
All right, I see I've got to go,
So get on your way, bad luck to you,
(*Sarcastically*) Since we've got to stick together, us two.
ABEL: Dear brother, why must you speak so. (*Hurt*)
Come on, now, Cain. We'll go together.
(*He is happy again*) Thanks be to God, we have fair
weather.

*CAIN – having picked up a large bundle of sheaves, most
of which look very thin and poor – and ABEL walk round the
stage to one corner where there is a small mound.*

CAIN: Lay down your bundle on this hill.
ABEL: Gladly, brother; that I will;
May God, my father, take my gift.
CAIN: Get it over! Come on – shift.
ABEL (*taking his bundle to the mound, putting it on top and
kneeling in front of it*): God, the maker of everything,
I pray you'll take my offering.
I grew and gathered it in fear.
I dedicate it humbly here
And give it up with good intent
To you, my Lord, who all has sent.
I burn it now, in hope and love (*He sets light to it*)
For you, my mighty Lord above.
CAIN: Get up! You've sung your foolish lay –
Now, Lord of Heaven, I'll have my say.

THE PLAY OF THE KILLING OF ABEL

And God forbid that you show me
Gratitude or courtesy;
Because, as sure as eagles fly,
It seems a crime to me that I
Should burn this corn that grew so tall
For you, God, when I need it all.
But I'll begin, now it's my turn,
To sort the food for me to burn.

He puts down his heap and begins to count out the sheaves one by one, only giving the very worst to the pile he reserves for his offering.

One sheaf, one: and this makes two.
Oh, no, God! These don't go to you.
Two, two, and now there's three –
But this one too will stay with me,
For I will choose and keep the best –
That's only sense. God has the rest.
Oh, this is stupid. Four sheaves here –
I've not grown better corn this year.
Last spring time, look, I sowed good corn
But what was it like when it was shorn?
Just thistles and briars – it looked a disgrace.
Weeds and docks all over the place.
Four sheaves, four – and this makes five.
I must keep this lot if I'm to thrive.
Five and six and one more's seven,
But these won't reach that God in heaven
And none of these four, I tell you straight,
Will ever end up in God's sight.
Seven sheaves now, and this makes eight.
ABEL: Brother Cain, this is not right.

THREE TOWNELEY PLAYS

CAIN: I don't care, brother; what I say
Is – I won't give my goods away.
If I had given him these to tend
I suppose you'd say he'd be my friend.
Brother, my luck must change if I'm
To give away what's really mine.
Now, eight and nine – and the tenth is this:
It's a scruffy old sheaf: we'll give it a miss.

He chooses the last, thin, poor-looking sheaf.

What? Give God all that ripe, good food?
Why, break my heart in two, it would.

ABEL: Cain, count out properly your share.

CAIN: Wait, can't you? Fourteen, sixteen there.

He begins to count out the second ten sheaves.

ABEL: This is wrong, Cain. You have lied.

CAIN: All right, come here and bind my eyes.

ABEL crosses and does so.

I can't see now. Are you satisfied?
Or are you still afraid I'll wink?
I shan't do any wrong, I think.

CAIN finishes his counting without being able to see.

Let me see now just how much –
(*He laughs*) Why, now I see myself well paid.

THE PLAY OF THE KILLING OF ABEL

I sorted these sheaves out by touch –
And the right ones I laid.

ABEL: Cain, of God I think you have no dread.

CAIN: If he gets any more, may the devil strike me dead.

He can't expect to get the lot –

He's made a bargain with what he's got.

I don't see why, if it comes to that,

I should give him enough to feed his cat.

The corn I'm burning – and all this here –

Has almost worn me out this year.

To get it reaped and put on the stack

Very nearly broke my back.

Now that's enough. This talk will stop.

For my own use I keep my crop.

ABEL: Cain, I beg you, think again

For fear of God, the hope of men.

CAIN: It's no business of yours what I do with my own.

Look at your sheep, all scabbed and fly-blown.

See to them first – then talk to me.

If not – you'll soon be sorry. You'll see.

You think I should give him one of these sheaves?

Picks up two of the best sheaves.

No, neither of these two will I leave.

Sees the thinnest sheaf yet.

Here, this one's thin. (*Picks it up*) Well, that makes two.

I don't mind seeing that one go.

But this is all against my will –

And that God will be angry still.

THREE TOWNELEY PLAYS

ABEL: Brother, take care which sheaves you tend,
That God in heaven will be your friend.

CAIN: My friend? – he wouldn't be if he could.
I've never done him any good.
If he were the worst enemy
I had, he'd get no more from me.
Square your conscience, lad. Make it like mine.

He sees a chance to get at Abel.

Here, why don't you give him some of your swine?

ABEL: If you give rightly, your conscience is straight.

CAIN: Ah, shut your mouth. Your carping I hate.

May the devil drown you in the sea.

Don't you worry what happens to me.

Nag, nag, nag all day I've heard –

I don't want to hear another word.

Now, unless you want me to start a riot,

Stand over there, and just keep quiet.

Well, I must burn this, I suppose.

Here's the fire (*lights it*). Now – up she goes.

It won't burn – it only smokes.

Hey, Abel! Come here! Help me blow.

It won't flare up! Why, I don't know.

He blows on it furiously.

Look at this smoke. (*Coughs*) I feel ashamed.

(*Blows*) Burn, can't you, burn. (*Blows*) Look, not a flame.

Some devil's got in this lot first.

I thought my lungs were going to burst

THE PLAY OF THE KILLING OF ABEL

Just then; they would have had enough
If I had blown another puff.
And look at that smoke! It stank to the skies.
I must wipe my streaming eyes.

ABEL: God's telling you, Cain, of his great wrath.
Your offering should flame. No smoke should come
forth.

CAIN: If it smokes for me, it should smoke for another.
Now, this is the last time I warn you, brother.
Shut up, or I'll shove it down your throat –
The fire, the smoke, the corn, the lot.

The VOICE OF GOD comes from off the stage.

GOD: Cain, why are you such a rebel
Against your brother Abel?
Show no anger to him or your Lord.
Fair dealing has its own reward;
But if you are not straight, be sure
I hide my face for evermore.

CAIN: Hey, who's that tramp shouting over the fence?
Where's this old fool who doesn't talk sense?
Come on, Abel – let's go hence;
God is out of his mind.
Don't stand here waiting – let us go.
It's not safe here, that I know.
God's no friend of mine.

ABEL stays where he is and turns to face his brother.

ABEL: This is a bad day's work that you've done, brother
Cain.

THREE TOWNELEY PLAYS

CAIN: I don't think so, brother. Now we'll go down again.

(*Aside, to audience*) And if we move fast, we shall be

In some dark place that God can't see.

ABEL: Dear brother, I must go away

To see how our herds are today.

We've left them far too long, I fear.

CAIN (*quietly but very angrily*): Oh, no, you're not. You're staying here.

We're going to settle this for good.

I shan't let you go. Did you think I would?

Abel, today you've tried me hard –

It's my turn now:

ABEL *tries to pass him: CAIN moves in his way.*

Your way is barred.

ABEL (*puzzled*): Why are you angry? Why is it your turn?

CAIN (*shouts*): You cheat, brother! Why did your sheaf burn?

My sheaf only spat and smoked

So that when I bent down I nearly choked.

ABEL (*angrily and slowly*): God's will I trust it were

That my sheaf burned so clear.

If yours smoked, am I to blame?

CAIN (*shouts, in fury*): I'll stop that mouth. I'll pay you back the same.

He picks up the jaw-bone of an animal lying on the floor.

This jaw-bone, see? – it looks all rough.

To end your life it's good enough.

He lunges at Abel and strikes him with the jaw-bone. ABEL falls.

THE PLAY OF THE KILLING OF ABEL

Now stay down there and take your rest.
To get rid of rats this way's the best.

ABEL: Vengeance, vengeance, Lord, I cry:
For I do not deserve to die.

ABEL dies. CAIN looks down at him.

CAIN: Yes, lie there, you old shrew. Let him lie.
(*To audience*) And if anyone thinks I've done amiss,
If he comes up here I'll do worse than this,
So that all men can see.
Yes, far worse than it is
I'll make it to be.

He looks at the body of his brother for a moment. His anger dies.

But now, since he is wrapped in sleep,
Into some hiding place I'll creep.
I am afraid. I don't know why.
If I am caught then I shall die.
For forty days I'll creep about,
And curse the man who finds me out.

GOD's voice is heard again.

GOD: Cain! Cain!

CAIN: Wait. There's someone calling me.
I'm over here, man. Can't you see?

GOD: Where is your brother Abel?

CAIN: How should I know? Down in hell.
Yes – down in hell. That's where he'll be.

THREE TOWNELEY PLAYS

Ask someone down there. Don't ask me.

Or perhaps he's somewhere round here sleeping.

(*Shouts*) Since when was my brother in my keeping?

GOD: Cain, Cain, you were mad.

The voice of your brother's blood,

Whom you have murdered in false wise,

From earth to heaven for vengeance cries.

Now you have stopped your brother's breath

My curse is with you till your death.

CAIN (*quieter*): Ah, shut your row up. I'll have none.

Keep your curse for when I'm gone.

Since I have done such monstrous sin

That I cannot your mercy win

Then you must cast me from your grace

And I must hide fast from your face.

No matter where a man should find

Me, he must kill me, to be kind,

Wherever he and I should meet –

Along the path or in the street.

And may he then, when I am dead,

Bury me at Goodybower, by the quarry head.

And if I come here alive again,

I shan't think much of my fellow men.

GOD: No, Cain. This shall not be.

No murderer is loved by me.

Whoever kills you, young or old,

Shall be punished sevenfold.

CAIN: All right, forget it. I know well

I'm only fit to be in hell.

There's no point in seeking any mercy.

THE PLAY OF THE KILLING OF ABEL

It won't come to the likes of me.
But I wish this corpse were hid,
For someone might creep up unknown
And if he saw my brother dead
He'd know at once what I have done.

But if young Pickharness were here
We could bury him together.
(*Shouts*) Hey, Pickharness, you layabout. Come here,
can't you?

PICKHARNESS *re-enters*.

PICKHARNESS: Master! Master!

CAIN: Do you hear me, boy? There's a pudding in the pot.
Take that you slacker; (*hits him*) and take that (*hits him again*).

PICKHARNESS: I hate that head under your hood.
Even if you were my father, I would.
I run round for you all through the day
And you do nothing but rage and storm.
A punch and a curse is all my pay.

CAIN: I only hit you to keep my hand warm.
But listen, boy; I have something to tell.
Today I killed my brother Abel.
I ask you, boy, to do this well –
To help me bury him.

PICKHARNESS (*shocked*): No, I don't believe you
Is your brother really slain?

CAIN: Quiet, boy! I won't say it again.
I only said it to tease you.

PICKHARNESS: Yes, but just in case it's true,

THREE TOWNELEY PLAYS

I'm leaving here for ever.
If I should stay along with you
We might be hung together.

CAIN: No, wait. I'm sorry, boy. Now cease
This talk, and you'll get a release.

PICKHARNESS: What, will they let me go in peace
Throughout the land?

CAIN: I vow they will, upon the book

PICKHARNESS: How can you manage that, you crook?

CAIN: Stand up, my faithful boy, and look

To see there's no advantage took;

For all who say this after me

Will full of fortune always be.

But what I order you must obey:

You'll cry, 'hear, hear', after all I say.

PICKHARNESS: Beer, beer! (*Aside*) Bring it on a tray.

CAIN proclaims the King's peace for himself and his servant because he can no longer have God's peace. PICKHARNESS echoes him in mocking asides.

CAIN: I command you all in the King's name –

PICKHARNESS: And in my master's, wicked Cain.

CAIN: That no man here finds fault or blame –

PICKHARNESS: There's only cold food at Cain's home.

CAIN: With each other or their knaves –

PICKHARNESS: What? Hark at him! I hope he raves!

CAIN: For they're as honest as can be –

PICKHARNESS: He only gives cold soup to me.

CAIN: The King will see that you're all right.

PICKHARNESS: I never get a proper bite.

THE PLAY OF THE KILLING OF ABEL

CAIN: The King wants all men to be safe.

PICKHARNESS: A pint of beer is what I'd have.

CAIN: He wants them their own lives to lead.

PICKHARNESS: A good square meal is what I need.

CAIN: Let no men say to one another –

PICKHARNESS (*shouts*): This is the man that killed his brother!

A pause.

CAIN (*quietly*): Let all men live in love and peace.

PICKHARNESS (*sarcastically*): You'll get bad wool from a rotten fleece.

CAIN: You'll be sorry, lad, if you talk like this.

(*To audience*) I hope each man in this hall will pay.

PICKHARNESS: They will when your horse gets a square meal of hay.

CAIN *is angry, and chases Pickharness round the stage.*

PICKHARNESS *dodges him.*

CAIN: I'll thrash you, boy. You won't get away.

He gives up the chase.

Ah, go to the devil, you tyke.

Except for Abel, my brother,

I've never known your like.

PICKHARNESS *has gone to the other side of the stage to avoid Cain. He stays there while he pronounces a blessing on the audience.*

THREE TOWNELEY PLAYS

PICKHARNES: All you here, before you go,
Stay while I bless you. You must know
That I wish the same good luck to you
That God to my master Cain has given.
Enjoy it well while you are living.
May it not change your whole lives through.

CAIN (*to Pickharness*): Come on down, I've finished now,
And anger me no more.
Get yourself up on that plough
And drive it on before.
Now, if I can, I shall
Teach you the devil's Law.
I warn you, boy, take care
Of riling me any more
Wherever we two go.
For I tell you, if you do
I'll hang you on this plough
With this rope. See, lad? So
Think well. And now you know.

PICKHARNES *runs off, frightened*. CAIN *speaks his final words to the audience*.

Goodbye, all my friends, for I must be away
To serve my master Satan through every weary day.
This is now my fate. Your pity you can keep.
But you say I deserve it and I swear you will not sleep
 This night.
Now farewell less and farewell more;
From everyone, for evermore
 I must hide.

CAIN *exits*.

THE PLAY OF
NOAH AND HIS SONS

CHARACTERS

GOD

NOAH

NOAH'S WIFE

SHEM, Noah's First Son

JAPHET, Second Son

HAM, Third Son

SHEM'S WIFE

JAPHET'S WIFE

HAM'S WIFE

Note: The verses inside square brackets
may be omitted in performance

SCENE – A SMALL COVE

Enter NOAH – he comes to the middle of the stage.

NOAH: True, Almighty God, who made everything that is;
Three people without doubt, yet one God in endless
bliss –

You made both night and day, each beast, bird and fish
And every creature living in accordance with your wish,
And by your great might
Gave us the welcome boon
Of stars, planets and moon
And sun which climbs at noon
To shine in burning light.

You created all the angels, a huge and mighty crowd,
To share your bliss in heaven. These angels were so
proud –

They really took the breath away. Yet their unfaithfulness
Was seven times more great to you than I can well express.

And why?
Of all the angel race
God gave Lucifer most grace –
And yet he left his place
And tried to aim too high.

He thought he was as great as the God who made him
In brightness and beauty, so God had to degrade him.
He hurled him down low into hell far away,
Him and his friends, and there they must stay

For ever.
They'll not, I can tell,
Leave that spot in hell,

THREE TOWNELEY PLAYS

But in burning flames yell
With comfort never.

Soon after this our gracious Lord made in his likeness
man,
To take the place Lucifer had before the world began;
And so he sent his Adam and the woman Eve
To dwell in Paradise, a place where none might ever
grieve.

To carry out this plan
He gave this stern command –
On one tree to lay no hand.
But now the cunning fiend
Made God angry with man.

He lured man into greed: he made him sin in pride –
But surely there in Paradise no sin could abide.
So quickly God threw Adam, and Eve his lovely wife,
Into a hard and cruel world to wander all their life,
And all their children too.

First in earth and then in hell
With the devils they had to dwell;
But everything would turn out well
For those who stay true.

For God promised all those who still show him love,
Happiness for ever in Heaven above.
But now when he looks he sees each foolish man
Sinning in evil whenever he can,
As he may well.

Some oppress the needy,
Some are fat and greedy.
All will have a speedy
End in deepest Hell.

THE PLAY OF NOAH AND HIS SONS

So far, NOAH has been complacent as he speaks. Now new notes of fear and sadness creep into his voice.

And so I fear that God himself will take revenge upon us,
For sin is so widespread that he can have no pity on us.
I've lived six hundred years myself – this no one can
deny –

Always in sorrow. But no sins have I done – no, not I!

That at least I can say.

But now I grow old,
Sick, sorry and cold,
Like muck upon mould,
I'm rotting away.

So now for the mercy of God I must call.
I'm Noah, your servant, great Lord over all.
My family falls with me without your grace.
Save us from harm. Bring us to your place

In Joy

And keep me from sin
This world within.
Great King of men,
Hear my cry.

*NOAH goes to the side of the stage and kneels. Then
GOD speaks from above.*

GOD: [Because I myself made each living thing –
With my own hand each duke, lord and king,
To live his own life in his own way –
Respect to me alone each man should pay,
Great and fervent,
Who made him what he is –

THREE TOWNELEY PLAYS

The fairest of creatures.
Man should love me
And repent.]

I thought I showed man love when I made him to be
Better than the angels, like the Trinity.
But now in great reproof and shame right low lies he -
On earth he likes to swill in sin that angers me
Most of all.
Vengeance I will take
On earth, for this sin's sake.
My anger shall awake
On great and small.

[I'm sorry that I ever thought of making man.
He sets no store by me - and I am his sovereign.
And so all men and women I shall make an end of first -
All of them shall perish. This bargain they can curse
Who evil do -
On earth I can see naught
But sin that is unsought,
And those who good have wrought
Are but a few.]

So I will destroy all this fair place;
I shall make awful torrents and huge floods race.
I've got good reason - man won't listen to me.
What I say, that I'll do; my vengeance he'll see
When all this is done.
I shall finish all life -
Except Noah and his wife.
They never showed me strife,
So I'll show them none.

THE PLAY OF NOAH AND HIS SONS

For his great gain, right quickly I'll go
To Noah, my servant, to warn him of woe.
I see only evil wherever I face.
Each man cheats his neighbour: of good there's no trace
 In his intent.
 But all this shall go
 In these floods I'll make flow.
 I shall deal all those woe
 That will not repent.

GOD now addresses Noah, who remains kneeling.

Noah, my friend, I tell you now, to save you from great
 pain,
To build a good, stout, wooden ship to keep out all the
 rain.
You always were a faithful servant, true to me as steel,
Obedient to my orders. Now my friendship you shall feel
 As a reward.
 In length your ship must be
 Three hundred cubits – that you'll see.
 Build it in height about thirty
 And fifty cubits broad.

[Paint your ship with pitch and tar inside and also out
To make it watertight – you'll find that a timely thought.
Let no man interfere with you. Three floors of rooms
 you'll make.
To finish this boat properly, much care you'll need to
take

 Before it's through.
Put in your ship also
Living rooms, one or two;

THREE TOWNELEY PLAYS

And stables, where can go
The beasts you'll take with you.

A window you will make one cubit high above the floor.
Underneath it on that side you must build a door.
No man will dare to stop you or show you any strife –
And when it is all finished, your true and loving wife
Take in with you.
Your sons of good fame,
Shem, Japhet and Ham –
Give shelter to them
And their wives too.]

For everything that lives on earth will be destroyed but
you
By heavy cloudbursts from the sky. All this I say is true.
Quite soon now it will start to rain, and then, without a
break,
It will continue forty days – commencing in a week,
Without fail.
Take beasts as well – just two
Of every sort will do,
Male and Female. Then you
Must hoist your sail.

[For they will be useful when this work is done.
Take food on board, enough for each one.
The birds and the beasts – remember them too;
Find them good fodder – I must counsel you –
In haste.
They must have corn and hay
And other meat always.
Do now as I say
In the name of the Holy Ghost.]

THE PLAY OF NOAH AND HIS SONS

NOAH *arises in amazement.*

NOAH: Ah! Praise and glory be to God! Who can you be
who thus
Tells me what hasn't happened yet? You are quite
marvellous.
Tell me, out of love to me, what your name can be.

GOD: My name is Mighty, of great dignity,
Passing man's thought
I am God Almighty
One God in Persons Three.
I made all men to be
To love me well you ought.

NOAH: Ah, Lord I thank you gratefully that you've
revealed the trap
You've laid for man's undoing all to me, a simple chap.
Bless us, Lord, I beg you – I ask in love, not fear,
Oh, bless us, Lord, and give us grace, that we may safely
steer
Our little boat.

GOD: Noah, when I end this strife,
Then you, your three sons and your wife,
Will start a new and better life –
Your little band afloat
Will fill the earth again when all these floods have gone
away.

GOD *now exits, if he has actually appeared on the stage.*

NOAH: Oh, Lord, I shall go running home as quickly as I
may.

THREE TOWNELEY PLAYS

(*To audience*) I hate to think what my wife will say now –
I suppose we shall have another big row,

It won't be the first –
For her temper is so short;
She gets angry over nought,
I know it – I've been caught
And come off worst.

NOAH'S WIFE *enters. She is rather larger than Noah, and looks strong.*

NOAH: Why, it's my wife, light of my life. And how, dear wife, are you?

WIFE: It hasn't made me any better, fool, for seeing you.
Now tell me, Noah, right at once, where you've been this morning.

For all you care we might be dead, for each day from its dawning

Until night
While with sweat we blink
You do just as you think,
While of good food and drink
We've not a bite.

NOAH: I've been made frightened by news I've just heard.

WIFE: Anyone can pull your leg, and always you'll be scared;

You're about the biggest fool that I have ever met,
And yet you treat me badly. That I met you I regret.

It's only brought me ill.
From morning until night

You'll talk of our sad plight –
You know that this is right.
God will give you your fill.

We women must watch for the men that we get.
I got a right one when I came to wed.
If he's angry, I listen, however it stands,
With a sorrowful face and wringing my hands,
 Expecting hurts.
But then, sometimes – while
I practise my guile –
I can hit him and smile.
 He gets his deserts!

WIFE: You lay just one hand on me and I'll floor you.

WIFE: There's no chance of slipping
 Away from here.
So listen, Noah,
I'll be even with you
Whatever you do.
 Stop this one, dear.

NOAH: Ow! So that's the way, is it? Right in the face.

THREE TOWNELEY PLAYS

WIFE: Three blows for two you shall get, by God's grace.

NOAH: And I'll give them back, by fair means or foul.

WIFE: You couldn't, old Noah.

NOAH (*disgusted*): When I touch you, you howl

Like a sick cow.

(*To audience*) For though she hits me back,

If I give her a whack

She screams until she's black.

I know just how.

But I won't lose my temper – I have a lot to do.

WIFE: Noah, you needn't stay here. We'll get on without you.

I'm going to do some spinning now.

Goes over to the side of the stage and picks up her spinning wheel. She sits down to it at the top of the stage.

NOAH: Well, do so if you wish,
I don't care how you use your time – spin if you want –
or fish.

But listen, wife.

Pray for me earnestly

Till me again you see.

WIFE (*sarcastically*): Yes, just as you've prayed for me
Throughout your life.

NOAH speaks the next speech as he wanders round the stage collecting tools and materials for the Ark.

THE PLAY OF NOAH AND HIS SONS

NOAH: I must start my work now, or God will make me
rue it,

I'll get my tools together, and think out how to do it.
It's going to be a botched-up job without God's helping
rule.

If he will not be with me, I'll be shown up as a fool
Among men.

(As he speaks, he turns his words into a prayer)

Still though I'm alone
I should soon get it done
In the name of the Father and the Son
And the Holy Ghost.

*Having got all his tools and materials ready he starts to put
the Ark together.*

To start the hull will be my first task;
I hope God will send me the help that I ask.

*He works for a few moments, then straightens up and looks
at what he has so far done approvingly.*

Hey! I'm doing all right – this boat looks quite good;
Praise be to the Lord who told me I could,
Now, let's see how long.

Now he takes out a tape and starts measuring.

Three hundred cubits certainly.
How wide? Why, yes – it is fifty.
In height it's, as he said, thirty.
Good, I'm not wrong.

THREE TOWNELEY PLAYS

Now he starts working on the Ark again, even more furiously.

It's too hot for a coat; I'll work in my shirt.
I'll just finish this mast – Ow! my back does hurt.
My spine must be cracking. This whole thing's so sad –
How do I keep going? At my age it's mad

 This job to start.

 My joints are so weak
 That no wonder they creak –
 And great strain it will wreak
 On my poor old heart.

The crow's nest and sails I'll put in place now,
Then the bridge and the tiller – when I've thought out
 how.

Over each little nail I'll take such great care
That this boat when I've finished will sail anywhere
 Without doubt.

He puts the last nail in and steps back again with a look of great pride.

 That's a good job well done.

He walks round the completed Ark complacently.

 Those nails, every one,
 Will not come undone,
 No planks will drop out.

Each window is finished – done just like he said,
Three floors of bedrooms – each one well made,
Pitch and tar caulking the cracks in the side.

THE PLAY OF NOAH AND HIS SONS

He stops walking round it, and pronounces his final judgement on it to the audience.

This will last for ever – I'm quite satisfied.

It's built better
And stronger found, it seems,
Than I hoped in my dreams;
With thanks my heart teems
To my Creator.

Now I will hurry, with no more delay,
To bring here my wife and my children today.

He goes out and brings back his three sons and their wives.

NOAH'S WIFE stops her spinning and joins them. They all gather round the Ark, looking at it in some surprise.

NOAH (to wife): Now listen to me, wife, and quickly decide.
We must all go from here – in our ships we will ride
With great speed.

WIFE: And what's up with you?
Who've you been talking to?
Flight's the best thing to do
If you're so afraid.

NOAH: There's other business waiting for us to deal with,
dear.

WIFE: Tell us all about, then, or you'll get a thick ear.

NOAH: He who cares will save us – blessed be his name.
He has promised for our sakes to shield us from great
shame,

THREE TOWNELEY PLAYS

And has urged
That by his great power whirled
Mighty floods will be hurled,
And all of our world
Will be submerged.

He said all men should die, except for you and me,
Our obedient, faithful sons and their good wives three.
A ship he made me fashion on these rough seas to run –
Therefore let us, with all our strength, now praise that
Noble One,
Healer of ills.
Let us go quickly thither.

WIFE: I really don't know whether –
Oh, dear; I'm all of a dither;
My heart with fear fills.

NOAH: Don't be afraid, good wife. Let us our good ark
load,
And when it's noon, with any luck, we'll be upon our
road.

SHEM: We'll do it. Brothers, these big bundles bear.

HAM: Although I work all night and day, you'll find I'll
do my share,
Shem my brother.

JAPHET: Without any bragging,
I'll help without flagging,

WIFE: Yet in fear of a scragging
You help your old mother.

THE PLAY OF NOAH AND HIS SONS

THE BROTHERS enter and re-enter the stage bearing loads which they put on the ark. Then everybody except NOAH'S WIFE gets on. She stubbornly stays where she is. While all this is going on, NOAH is speaking.

NOAH: Now we are all ready, just as ought to be,
So let us get on board our ship. Buck up, my children
three.
Our cattle and our food must come on too – Why, what's
up, wife?

WIFE: No one ever barred me up, no, not in all my life
In such a little cage.
There's hardly room to turn,
Indeed, I can't discern
The front end from the stern –
And we'll stay here an age.

NOAH crosses over to his wife, trying not to be furious.

NOAH: We must await God's grace, good wife and there-
fore here we stop,
And so come on board gladly now, for soon the rains will
drop.

WIFE: Husband, dear, for no one would I dream of getting
in
Until I've had a chance at last to have a little spin
Upon my wheel,
(To audience) Although he will not let me
He'll do well to get me
Once down here I have set me –
For I'll make him squeal.

THREE TOWNELEY PLAYS

She sits down with her spinning wheel. NOAH marches angrily back on to ark and looks up at the sky.

NOAH: Look up in the sky. See – a huge storm-cloud
Looming up. Feel the rain. Hear the thunderings loud.
The seven great planets – each one leaves its stall.
See the lightning's bright flashes. Huge houses fall
 With a clout –
 Great buildings and bowers;
 Strong castles and towers –
 So hard are these showers
 That fall round about.

Therefore, wife, don't rile me. Come quick into the ark.

WIFE: Oh no, old Noah, that I won't. You bite less than
 you bark.

SHEM'S WIFE: Good mother, please do come in now; the
 sky is overcast.
The sun and moon have disappeared.

HAMS WIFE: And feel the cruel wind's blast,
 And the rain.
 These floods now begin,
 So mother, come in.

WIFE: I'll sit here and spin.
 You all shout in vain.

JAPHET'S WIFE: If you want to spin, good mother, spin
 here on board the ship.

THE PLAY OF NOAH AND HIS SONS

NOAH: Now listen, for the second time, come in, for fellowship.

WIFE: I don't care if I lose or win; in truth, your husband –
love

I don't give one-and-fourpence for. My spinning-wheel
I'll shove

Here on the shore
Before I board your raft.

NOAH (*really angry*): By God, you're talking daft –
You'll be sorry soon you laughed.

I'll make you so sore.

NOAH'S WIFE *stands up and looks round her, alarmed.*

WIFE: Yes, up comes the water – there's nowhere left dry.
So now in your fine ship right quickly come I,
For fear that I drown here.

NOAH: Oh, wife, there's no doubt
That we'll soon regret that you stayed so long out
Of the ship.

WIFE: There'll not be a day
When I do all you say.

NOAH: For this I dare say
You'll taste the whip.

NOAH *goes to his wife angrily, as if to hit her.*

WIFE: Go on, good husband Noah, now. Say just what you
will.

These words can never hurt me.

THREE TOWNELEY PLAYS

NOAH: Well, now you've had
your fill,
I'll now prepare to beat you with my staff until you shriek.
Will blows hurt? Tell me.

WIFE: That they won't, you fool,
you're far too weak.

NOAH: That's enough said.
Beg mercy, I say.

WIFE: To that, I say nay.

NOAH: If you don't, on this day
I'll crack open your head.

WIFE (*to audience*): Oh Lord, were I in happiness, and easy
in my mind.

Oh Lord, were I a widow, then comfort I could find.

(*To Noah*): For your life, dear my husband, I wouldn't
give a penny,

(*To audience again*) And of all the other wives I know, I'm
sure there aren't so many –

Yes, of this I am quite sure –
That, after the lives they've led,
They wish their husbands dead
And as true as I eat bread
I wish our master were.

NOAH (*to audience*): Oh, all married men, while your wife
is still young,
If you value your sanity, bridle her tongue.
It's very distressing – my heart is near broke

THE PLAY OF NOAH AND HIS SONS

To see such great anger among wedded folk.

But all the same,
As God gives me bliss,
I'll soon have whipped this.

WIFE: Watch out you don't miss,
You're so small and lame.

NOAH: I'll make you shut up, you cause of our troubles.
I'll break body and bone, until your blood bubbles.

They fight. The outcome is uncertain.

WIFE: Oh, help! I am done for. Get off, you great beast.

NOAH: Why does she groan? She's not having the least
Of this fight.
For peace I will sue –
My back's broke in two.

WIFE: And I'm all black and blue –
Such a sight.

SHEM: Ah, why keep arguing all the time, my good father
and mother?

HAM: Why are you so bad-tempered, always rowing with
each other?

JAPHET: These waters are all rising. Hear the torrent's
mighty roar.

NOAH and HIS WIFE pick themselves up and dust themselves down looking very ashamed of themselves.

THREE TOWNELEY PLAYS

NOAH: We'll do just as you say, my sons – not argue any more,

Children dear.
So, to the tiller I'll hark
To look after my ark.

WIFE: I'll watch the stars in the dark
By which we steer.

They both climb into the ark.

NOAH: This is a great flood, wife, so look out as I steer.

WIFE: It seems to me you're right. I feel a deadly fear –
These waves are so enormous.

NOAH: Help us, God, in our need.
As you are a good Helmsman – the best one, as we read,
Of all –
Then guide us on our way,
Just as I heard you say.

WIFE: We're in great dread today:
Lord, hear our call.

NOAH and HIS WIFE are now being extremely pleasant to each other.

NOAH: Good wife, please guard the tiller, while I test
The depth of water. I think that would be best.

WIFE: I'll do it very carefully. Go your way –
For on this flood we've floated many a day
In grief.

THE PLAY OF NOAH AND HIS SONS

NOAH: Now, the water I'll sound.
(*Throws a plummet over the side*)
Ah, it's far to the ground.
This effort, I've found
Gives us no relief.

Above all hills around us the floods have risen sore,
Why, more than fifteen cubits' depth – but they will rise
no more.
They cannot do so, I'm convinced, for this I do well
know –
Because it's rained for forty days; it's time for it to slow,
As God insisted.

Throws his plummet over the side again.

Again my lead tries
This sea as it lies.

He pulls the plummet up triumphantly.

Why, to my surprise,
The flood has desisted.

Now the storms cease, and the floods come together,
Both the great and the small.

WIFE: We shall soon have fair
weather.
Why, Noah, do you see? Look, the sun in the east. (*She
points*)
When these floods go, we'll have a huge feast
When we're from danger free.

THREE TOWNELEY PLAYS

NOAH: We've been floating on these tides
Three hundred days, and more besides.

WIFE: Look, look – at last the sea subsides –
Oh, Lord, now safe are we.

NOAH *gets ready to lower the plummet a third time.*

NOAH: For the third time the water's depth I will divine.

WIFE: Oh, you are so slow, husband. Pull in your line.

NOAH: I can touch with the palm of my hand the land here.

WIFE: Then at last we can safely feel full of good cheer.
But, husband, I seek
To know what land this may be.

NOAH *looks round about him, looks in the sky, and then consults a map.*

NOAH: In Armenia are we.

WIFE: Then blessed be He
Who guides us so meek.

NOAH: I see uncovered mountain tops, many at a sight.
There's nothing now to stop me, the weather is so bright.

WIFE: Of our improving fortunes these are omens strong
and true.

NOAH: Which is the finest bird – I want to know from
you –

THE PLAY OF NOAH AND HIS SONS

Which without delay
Could off from here take wing
And quickly to us bring
Of joy some tokening
From North, South – any way?

For ten months ago we started; ten months this very day.

WIFE: Of all our birds the raven would come back soon,
I'd say.

As quickly as I can then, Noah, I'll free him from his stall.
He may come back today, with luck – or maybe not at
all –

Perhaps before noon.

NOAH: I will cast out also
Some white doves, one or two.

*NOAH casts off two white doves, while HIS WIFE
throws out a raven.*

Fly off, dear birds – now go.
God send you back soon.

Now all these birds have flown over the sea,
So each one of us pray – each one kneel on his knee –
To God, who alone is deserving of this,
To send back our birds with some new signs of bliss
To aid us.

WIFE: They will not miss the land
Now the water sinks to the sand.

NOAH: Then thank we God's great hand,
The Lord that made us.

THREE TOWNELEY PLAYS

They all kneel and pray. After a moment or two, NOAH stands up and looks round, puzzled. All the rest stand up with him.

NOAH: It is a curious thing, you know – or so it seems to me –

That they've not yet returned to us, those little birds
that we

Cast out this very morning.

WIFE: Oh, good husband it may be
They still seek something to bring.

NOAH: The raven is hungry

Nearly always.

He is a senseless bird in mind,
And if some carrion he find –
For he'll eat any stale or rind –
He'll be gone for days.

The doves are more gentle, and trustworthy too.
We'll never be let down by them, they're so true.

WIFE: Look – there's one now flying a little away;
I can see in her beak she's got new things to say
To land we've hauled.
It's from an olive tree –
A branch, it seems to me.

NOAH (*vastly pleased*): By God, it is, I see,
That's just what it's called.

He reaches out and catches the dove as it flies.

THE PLAY OF NOAH AND HIS SONS

Little dove, faithful bird, you're the best one of all.
You're as solid and true as a stone in a wall.
I knew all the time that you would come home.

WIFE: It's a good sign, I think, that we needn't roam
Any more.

NOAH'S WIFE *is pulling up the plummet, which she
threw out while Noah was talking to the dove.*

The water since she's come,
I've found out from the plumb,
Has fallen a fathom
And maybe more.

SHEM: See, father, see – the floods have gone.

HAM: Father, oh, look – away they've all run.

JAPHET: As still as a stone our good ship stands.

NOAH: I long to put my feet on dry land.
And so, my boys,
My three children dear,
Let us go with good cheer
Away now from here –
We'll soon find new joys.

They all come down from the ark.

WIFE: We've been on that ark, Noah, quite long enough
With suffering and misery and living so rough.

THREE TOWNELEY PLAYS

NOAH: Well, look – on this land not a cart or a plough
Is left, as I see. Not a tree has a bough
Or any other thing,
But everything's gone –
Great buildings are down;
Destroyed is each town
By this flooding.

*The band look round them in horror at the scenes of
desolation.*

WIFE (*quietly*): These waters have crashed through the
whole world wide;
There's nothing but havoc on every side.

NOAH (*quietly*): The rich and the proud to their deaths have
been brought –
And every man living on earth who's been caught
In sin.
Each one has been slain
And is bearing Hell's pain.

WIFE (*quietly*): From that place again
Will they freedom win?

NOAH: What? Never will they leave Hell's fires, unless
God in his Might
Remembers all their sorrows, and brings them to his sight.
As he is joy in misery, I pray to his great grace,
In highest heaven with his angels to give us a place
Above,
So with his saints in sight
And his angels bright

THE PLAY OF NOAH AND HIS SONS

We may come to his great light.

Amen, for love.

They all leave the stage, towing the Ark behind them.

THE FIRST SHEPHERDS' PLAY

CHARACTERS

GYB, First Shepherd

JOHN HORNE, Second Shepherd

SLOW-PACE, Third Shepherd

JACK, a boy

THE ANGEL

MARY

Note: The section inside square brackets
may be omitted in performance

SCENE – GRAZING LAND NEAR A TOWN.
IT IS BARE AND DESOLATE

Enter 1ST SHEPHERD; he is obviously thoroughly depressed

1ST: Lord, the man who is gone, why, he's better off dead;
For no more bad luck's going to fall on his head.
I hate it down here, and always it goes –
First you're ill, then you're well – first it pours, then it
snows;

First you're sad,
Then you're happy again:
Both in sunshine and rain
Your own fortune seems plain –
And then it comes bad.

So the world, as I say, goes like this everywhere.
After good luck, the sorrow is too hard to bear,
And the man who's content while his life's going well
When it comes to the push might as well down in hell
Be fast set.

A rich man, of course,
Soon suffers remorse;
And Jack Cope on his horse
Has to walk then, I bet.

So listen to me now – I say it's God's fault,
For whatever happens, my luck's at a halt.
Like some great big baby, I can't help but cry
When I lie in my bed, for great cares have I
And sorrow.

All my sheep are gone –
I'm not left with one.

THREE TOWNELEY PLAYS

The foot-rot has come,
So I beg and borrow.

But it's not much good moaning and groaning and
grieving;

The country's my home – but I'll have to be leaving.

The rent-man is coming, and I'm almost broke;

I've near nothing left, like the rest of our folk.

I may as well sing

Now I'm penniless.

This makes my heaviness,

So curse this distress

Which there's no helping.

Well, I've made up my mind, so I may as well say

That some way I'll find to be happy today.

Though I've lost all my sheep – seen each one of them die,

Yet, if all's not against me, then God from the sky

Will send grace.

To the fair I shall go

For more sheep, and so

My bad luck might go,

Despite my hard case.

He goes to the side of the stage, still despondent.

*Enter 2ND SHEPHERD – he is much livelier than the 1st.
He addresses the audience from the middle of the stage.*

2ND: God bless you, God bless you, all you sitting here,
And save all the rest who have yet to appear.

He saved you and me, upside-down, right way up,

When he hung on a tree – I'm not making this up.

So Christ save us

THE FIRST SHEPHERDS' PLAY

From all mischiefs,
From robbers and thieves,
And from all the griefs
That they bring us.

From boasters and braggers may God keep us free,
Who with their long knives might well hurt you and me:
From confidence tricksters with flick-knives and all
Such a twister and fraud does nothing at all

But boast;
And he who dares mutter
Ends up dead in the gutter.
No ploughs, corn or butter
Save him from the post.

He looks just as proud as if he were an earl
With his head in a cloud and his hair in a curl.
He speaks in a great voice – he has a grim look;
I never thought I'd see such liberties took
As he glides.

I don't know who's better
Or which one is greater,
The boy or his master,
So strongly he strides.

If he asks me for something, I know it must go –
I'd soon wish I hadn't if I should say no.
But, God who made everything, hear while I say –
Help these wicked men to a much better way
For the sake of their souls,
And let them soon mend;
Give them a good end

THREE TOWNELEY PLAYS

And to heaven them send
When it calls.

(*To 1st Shepherd*) Hullo Gyb, hullo there; it was you I saw.
You'll tread all the corn down, Gyb: what's all this for?

1ST: Who's calling? John Horne then. Well I'll be blowed.
How are you getting on? What brings you on this road?

2ND: Oh, I don't hurt.
Are you still round here?

1ST: Yes I am, John, I fear.

2ND: I thought from back there
I saw your shirt.

They come together in the middle of the stage.

1ST: I'm always the same, though I don't know why.
No man in this land is in worse straits than I.

2ND: Poor men are in the ditch. In spite of our prayers
The world never changes, and nobody cares
Around here.

1ST: I've heard it said
That a man cannot wed
And expect to be fed
All in one year.

2ND: Well, we'll creep out of here and be on our way.

1ST: I'm off to buy sheep.

THE FIRST SHEPHERDS' PLAY

2ND: Hey! What's that you say?
Why, you must be asleep: where would they go?
You can't keep them anywhere here, Gyb.

1ST: Oh, no?
Who am I?
I'll pasture my flock
Wherever I like
You'll see them all right.

2ND: You'll not try.
Not a single sheep's tail shall you bring hither.

1ST: I will without fail: a hundred together.

2ND: Gyb, you've been at the beer. Where would you get them from?

1ST: They'll come, just you see (*shouts*): Belle-wether, go on!

Here they imagine they see a flock of sheep – they start acting as if driving them along.

2ND (*shouts*): I say, Tib, go slow.

1ST (*shouts*): And, I say Tib again,
Run off over the plain.

2ND (*to Gyb*): Oh, you give me a pain.
(*Shouts*) Tup, I say, whoa!

1ST: Why don't you shut up, man, and let the sheep through?
Gid up!

THREE TOWNELEY PLAYS

2ND: Wait a bit!

1ST: I'm right fed up with you.
Run away, you old rogue, and go home to bed
Or I'll give you a thump on the back of your head
That will make you reel.
Now, give my sheep space.

2ND: Just one minute's grace –
Here comes old Slow-pace
From his mill-wheel.

Enter 3RD SHEPHERD – fat, slow in speech, yet with a certain knowing look about him.

3RD: What's all this, what's all this? What's up with you two?
Ah, good day to you both.

1ST: Listen here, you,
To what I ask.
I was off to buy stock;
I was driving my flock –
He says not one lock
Of their hair shall him pass.

Still, though he be mad, they will come this way.

3RD: All right, tell me this, mate – where are your sheep, eh?

2ND: Why, sir! – there's not one to be seen, on my oath
Since I've been here standing.

THE FIRST SHEPHERDS' PLAY

3RD:

Then God help you both.

It seems to me
You'd fry fish before they're caught –
You argue over naught;
Such clowns I never thought
I'd ever see.

(*To audience*) Good sense always wonders where sense can
be found.

Two foolish old men you see here on this ground;
With them at the wheel the best ship would sink –
A man could get rid for the price of a drink

Of these two.

They shout and they swear
About things that aren't there.
They'd hatch eggs, would this pair,
By shouting 'go!'

Rather have food than sorrow, I say.
You remind me of Moll, who lived down this way.
Though she only had one, she kept counting her sheep
While her milk-pitcher fell, serve her right, in a heap,

And she picked up the bits.

'Oh, my God', Old Moll said,
But still one sheep she had,
And her milk-jug busted –
It had me in fits.

But as common-sense seems to be your great need,
See how I do, and follow my lead.
You don't need to worry – all you need I know.
Here, you, hold my horse – now, this bag you must throw
On my back,
While I with my hand

THREE TOWNELEY PLAYS

Unloose the sack band.
Now, come here and stand,
Gyb and Jack.

The boy JACK enters behind and watches them.

There, I've turned it all out, and is anything there?

SLOW-PACE shows plainly that his bag appears completely empty.

1ST: No, there's not, without doubt.

Like your brains, it's
thin air.
Now, have a good look – take as long as you will –
Summon your wits, so your dim heads you fill.
Look twice in here
And make quite sure.

2ND: Our senses are poor.
We might get some more
If his wisdom we hear.

JACK comes forward.

JACK: You're all fools together: so may God give you
pain –
A man acts like you who's not right in his brain.
It's hard luck on your parents, your mother and father –
A hare or a lamb as a child they would rather
Have had.
Of all chumps I can tell

THE FIRST SHEPHERDS' PLAY

From heaven to hell,
You three bear the bell –
May God make you sad.

1ST (*sarcastic in his resignation*): Well, how is our flock? Tell me, young Jack.

JACK: There's grass to their knees.

1ST (*amazed, realising his lost flock has reappeared*): Well, I'm blowed.

JACK: Come on back
If you want to see them – your own sheep you will know.

Exit JACK. The 2ND and 3RD SHEPHERDS start to follow him.

1ST: No, let's all three sit down – on the beer we will go.

They come back and sit down.

3RD: I feel
I would rather eat.
What is drink without meat?
Let's see what we can get
To make a meal.

Then we'll tuck in and make ourselves fat.

2ND: No, find your own grub.

3RD: By God, I can't do that.

2ND: I'm supplying the drink, and I think that's good.

THREE TOWNELEY PLAYS

But all bounty you hate – not a bite of your food
Have I ever had.

1ST: When we sit down to our tray,
Let's eat our own, eh?
I don't want to stay
Beholden to you, lad.
Since I've known you, your tempers have terrible ends.

3RD: Now that's rather hard, Gyb – we've always been
friends.

2ND: Let us eat first, mates, I ask of you all –
If we fill ourselves up, we'll get tired of this brawl,
Or think it's in fun.
Now, what's in our store?
Look, a huge bit of boar.

*Looks in Slow-pace's previously empty bag. All the
shepherds are amazed, but very pleased, to see it unaccountably
full of food.*

1ST: Set mustard before –
Our meal has begun.

Here's a cow's foot, with good sauce on, I've seen:
The leg of a sow – well powdered it's been:
Two blood-puddings I find: and a liver inside –
We'll eat well now, mates: this bag keeps us plied
With more.
There's beef and there's mutton
From a ewe that was rotten;
There's enough for a glutton –
Let's eat all this store.

THE FIRST SHEPHERDS' PLAY

He pulls food out of Slow-pace's bag as 2ND SHEPHERD holds it.

2ND: Here in my own bag I've got, boiled and roast,
The tail of an ox – that wouldn't be lost.
Well, well, God be praised; who cares what it costs?
We need good strong food – it keeps out the frosts
In the morning.
Here's pigs' snouts – a pair:
And here's part of a hare.
Here, our manners aren't fair –
We've no forks for eating.

2ND puts his own bag down. 3RD picks his up, amazed as food pours out.

3RD: I've found here the leg of a goose – very pleasant –
All covered in egg-yolk. Here's pork. Here's a pheasant.
Here's a tart, fit for a lord to choose.
Here's a calf's liver, cooked in its own juice
And fat.
This is all right – it's a sort of hors d'œuvre
For our appetites to serve.

1ST SHEPHERD *is annoyed at Slow-pace's pomposity.*

1ST: Here, you've got a nerve,
Using long words like that.

2ND SHEPHERD *hands him a tankard of beer.*

Could you by your learning reach me a drink?
Then I'd be merrier; you know what I think.

THREE TOWNELEY PLAYS

2ND: Here's good Ely Ale – look out now, I say –
If you drink it too quick, it'll go down the wrong way.
Ah, so. (*He watches 1st take a long swallow*)
This gives right good cheer –
Good wholesome beer.

3RD (*alarmed*): You've had too much, I fear –
Now let me have a go.

He seizes the tankard – which is huge – and drinks from it.

2ND: I know what you're like – you must leave me some.

1ST (*to 2nd*): That's all right – he's just sipping: he's having
you on.
Hark at him belching.

2ND SHEPHERD *snatches the tankard.*

2ND: I know you lot.
I'd be flat on my back if I let go the pot
For a second.
Be it wine, be it ale,
If my breath once fail
You'd all be in full sail.
God give you more than you reckoned.

2ND SHEPHERD *drinks long and noisily.*

3RD: By my old mother Alice's soul, that's ill drunk.

1ST SHEPHERD *peers into the tankard.*

1ST: As sure as I'm here, to the bottom it's sunk.

THE FIRST SHEPHERDS' PLAY

2ND: There's one bottle left.

3RD: That's what I like to hear.
We shall have to draw lots for it.

2ND: That sounds quite fair.
I know –
The one who sings best
Has first gulp at the rest.

1ST: Your beer you have missed –
I'll make you sound flat and low.

They sing.

1ST: Well, we've done our best and we've made a great
sound.
I'll have the first drink. (*Drinks*)

2ND: Stop! Let the tankard go
round. (*Takes tankard and drinks*)

1ST: Go easy on that; you'll drink the whole brew.

1ST SHEPHERD *takes tankard again and drinks.*

3RD: Here, you've drunk a whole quart. I hope it chokes
you.

1ST: Listen, he raves.
There's enough drink here still
For your inside to fill.

3RD (*gloomily*): I know you when you swill –
You're both knaves.

THREE TOWNELEY PLAYS

1ST: No, we're all knaves together; so now let it rest –
And you too. (*To 3rd Shepherd*)

2ND: You're right, Gyb, that would be the best –
We won't have a row.

1ST: Now let us decide
Whose bag the leftovers should all go inside.

3RD: Mates, listen here –
If we have any more
It should go to the poor.

1ST: Right! We'll pick it up off the floor
The hungry to cheer.

They pick up the leftovers to give to the poor.

2ND: It's getting quite dark – I think we should sleep;
I know I'm ready for it – I'm near in a heap.

3RD: To guard us from harm tonight, let's make a cross.
(*Stands*)

Bless us, Lord; bless us all; keep us, Christ on the Cross,
From fear.

Mighty Jesu,
The crucified Jew:
Saint Mark and Saint Andrew –
God be near.

They lie down and sleep. THE ANGEL appears and sings.

ANGEL: Hark, shepherds, awake: give love you shall.
He is born for your sake – the lord perpetual.

THE FIRST SHEPHERDS' PLAY

He has come to take and ransom you all.
Your sorrow to slake; the king imperial,
He is.

This child is born
At Bethlehem this morn.
You'll find him, forlorn,
Between two beasts.

THE SHEPHERDS *wake up, frightened and confused.*

1ST: Hey! God help us all! What the devil was that?
It was like a ghost singing – all notes, sharp and flat.
I pray God to save us from this fearful song.
I don't think I like this – there's something all wrong.
I thought
Someone screamed out loud –
Yet it seemed like a cloud.
I can still hear the sound –
Here – we're properly caught.

2ND: You're wrong about this, Gyb; I'm as sure as I can
That he spoke to us three as if he'd been a man.
When he stood in this field, my heart beat so fast –
It was an angel that over us passed
Without doubt.
He spoke of a child
Whom we have to find.
See that star? That's our guide,
That shines so far out.

They all look up at the star.

3RD: It was marvellous to see – it burned so bright
It seemed almost to me like a thunderbolt's light,

THREE TOWNELEY PLAYS

But I saw it with my eye as I lay on the floor.
Here, it was a good tune – I'd not heard it before
As I recalled.
He said in his song
(Unless I'm all wrong)
We should all go along
To worship this lord.

1ST: This must be the child that the prophets foretold
Should set all those free whom Adam sold.

2ND: Well, listen to me – I'm sure this isn't wrong.
Isaiah once said that a prince, great and strong
He shall be –
And a King with a crown
On David's old throne –
And like him there'll be none
Ever seen with our eye.

[3RD: Isaiah wrote also, our fathers have said,
That Jesse would have a fair daughter, who would
Bear, by God's grace, a flower most bright.
The virgin has now made these words come out right,
Do you see?
Be sure now we may,
He is born on this day –
The one son of her
Born of Jesse.

1ST: And there's more who've spoke of him – there's Sybil
even –
And Nebuchadnezzar – though he was a heathen.

THE FIRST SHEPHERDS' PLAY

When he pushed three men in a furnace to burn,
A fourth man stood with them – and that was God's son.

2ND: That figure
 Was a revelation
 That God would have a son.
 That's a good lesson
 For us to consider.

3RD: Jeremiah mentioned him: and Moses did too
 When he saw him stand by a bush burning through.
 When Moses approached to see more of this sight
 He found to his joy that the bush was all right –
 A very odd go.

1ST: That was so he could see
 Her holy virginity,
 That she undefiled should be –
 At least, I think so –

With a son unlike anything we've seen before.

2ND: Well, that's wrong for a start – you'll soon be saying
 'I saw
 This child of a virgin' – this strange thing
 I mean,
 With her quite undefiled – a woman still clean
 To bear a son.

1ST: Nothing is impossible
 God's own wishes to fulfil.
 Though something cannot come, it will
 If God wants it done.

THREE TOWNELEY PLAYS

2ND: Habbakuk and Eli both prophesied.
Elizabeth, Zacharias and others beside.
David, I think, would bear witness too –
John Baptist for sure – and Daniel also.

3RD: They were all saying
 He's God's son alone;
 Without him shall be none.
 His seat and his throne
 Shall be everlasting.

Vergil the poet said in his rhyme –
Let's see, I might get it all right this time;
'Jam nova progenies coelo demittitur alto,
Jam rediet virgo, redeunt Saturnia regna.'

2ND: Here, you're at it again: can't you give it a rest?
I'm fed up with your languages – you're a right pest.
 You might be preaching.
 Close your Latin book up –
 That's not how you were brought up.

1ST: If you'll all just shut up
 I'll give some more teaching.]
The Angel told us that this child we shall find,
Whom this virgin shall have – and that is the sign.
He'll clear all our sins up – that's all I'll say.
Yet there is a bit more: this man, I think, may
 Give to us
 Riches and ease –
 Enough food, and peace;
 Love, happiness
 To thrive amongst us.

THE FIRST SHEPHERDS' PLAY

3RD: I think this is true. I think there will be
With this King down here, peace on land and sea.

2ND: That's enough of that, mates. Now, listen here –
I wish we knew more of that song in the air
The Angel sang.
His voice – clear as a name –
Said from heaven he came.

1ST: I thought the same
As in my ears it rang.

2ND: I just can't get over that marvellous song.
There were twenty-four short notes to every one long.

3RD: I wish we could sing as good as he can.

1ST: Well, we can't. He sang better than any mere man.
I don't know –
It sounded so good
And gentle in mood.

3RD: I reckon I could –
I'll have a go.

1ST: All right, have a good shout. Let's see how you do.

3RD: No, not on my own – you'll have to sing too.

2ND: You're too frightened to try.

1ST: I'll give you a good
punch
If I don't hear you singing.

THREE TOWNELEY PLAYS

3RD: You're a rotten bunch,
 You are.

2ND: Come on, start up your row.

1ST: He'll have to sing now.

3RD: You'll have no idea how
 To take up my air.

He sings, and the others join in.

1ST: Now we have finished our very last song.

2ND (to 3rd): Your groans were all right – quite well you
 have done.

3RD: Then let us set out. We must get there soon.

1ST: You don't half keep on. There's no light from the moon.
 Nevertheless
 We'll do what we're told.

2ND: That's right, I do hold.

3RD: To the East is this fold –
 That's my guess.

They set out round the stage.

1ST: I pray God will let us see this child born today.

2ND: Great prophets have wished very dearly to say
 That they'd seen this one sight.

THE FIRST SHEPHERDS' PLAY

3RD: It can hardly be true
That it's happening to us – we might almost say, too,
That we have seen
What, by the prophets inspired,
Many saints have desired,
If by God they'd been required;
Yet blind have they been.

2ND: God grant that it's true.

3 RD: Amen to that prayer.

1ST: Stop just a moment – now, look over there.
The star that we want is coming down low.

2ND: It's burning much brighter – quick, we must follow.

They move round the stage to the crib quietly brought on.

Here he is.

3RD: Who's going to lead?

IST: I dare not, indeed.

2ND: You're the oldest, Gyb,
 So you it is.

They approach the manger shyly and kneel. The 1ST SHEPHERD feels in his bag and brings out a small wooden box.

1ST: Hail, tiny King: hail, the greatest in might.
Hail, most noble of us all. Hail, Duke! Hail, Knight!

THREE TOWNELEY PLAYS

I think you are the Lord over every one
For ever – hail, the first of all men.

Here I offer –
I want you to take
It, just for my sake;
As a toy if you like –
This little spruce coffer.

He places it at the foot of the crib.

2ND: Hail, little child asleep. Hail, the giver of all good!
Hail – give me one speck of your grace, if you would.
Hail, little baby! – hail, David's son –
You're what we've been waiting for – you must be the
one.

I have here a ball. (*Looks in his bag for it*)
I hope you'll like it.
I've not got much yet –
You're lucky to get
A present at all.

Places it at the foot of the crib.

3RD: Hail, maker of man: hail, little chap.
Hail as best I can – you're a poor little scrap.
Like my mates here, I'd like to give more than a greeting –
Something to let you remember our meeting.

This bottle – (*Holds out a now empty beer
bottle*)
We use them round here;
We like it, I fear.
If you should ever drink beer,
It holds quite a lot.

THE FIRST SHEPHERDS' PLAY

He places the bottle at the foot of the crib.

MARY: The maker of every thing born on this day –
My own small son sleeping here in the hay
Will reward all the three of you – as he is the Lord
He gives you his thanks – you may go by his word,
Which is ever continuing.
He grants you his grace,
So tell all of this case.
He'll quicken your pace
And give you a good ending.

1ST: Goodbye, dear Lord – and your mother, as well.

2ND: Whoever we meet, what we've just seen, we'll tell.

3RD: We must all be restored. God grant that we are.

1ST: Amen to that – we'll shout this afar
High and low.
To everyone, bliss,
Mirth, happiness.
In praise of all this
We'll sing as we go.

They run off happily. MARY watches them go.

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